

CZECHOSLOVAKIA: THE CAREFUL SATELLITE

The Land of Schweik

PETER SCHMID

NOTHING brings the meaning of freedom home to one more vividly than to pass from Warsaw to Prague, as I did this spring. I found that the Czechoslovakian capital had come through the war almost without a scratch—only the old City Hall was destroyed, by a German bomb in the course of the uprising that accompanied the Russian taking of the city. Prague's churches, palaces, and its proud burghers' mansions still stood intact, their centuries-old patina scarcely disturbed. The same good luck—if it was luck—protected the rest of the country. The Skoda works, and the other Czech industrial plants which had been expanded by the Germans during their occupation, suffered far less from the Allied bombings than the factories of Germany, France, and Italy. Like their monuments and factories, the Czechoslovakian people, too, passed through the Second World War virtually without a scratch. Their youth did not have to go to the front to die, and no underground movement worthy of the name exposed the civilian population to the horrors of SS reprisals and the concentration camp—Lidice, leveled at Heydrich's order, being the one grisly exception that confirmed the rule.

Warsaw's fate was very different:

KHRUSHCHEV's recent visit to Prague, hard on the heels of his purge of the party presidium in Russia, underlines again the importance of Czechoslovakia, one of Russia's most docile satellites. What makes the Czechs behave that way? PETER SCHMID is a veteran Swiss journalist and COMMENTARY contributor who has filed articles from the four corners of the earth. His memorable report on the Hungarian revolt, "Budapest Under Fire," appeared in January.

bombed in 1939, martyred and massacred by the German occupation regime, and razed to the ground after its uprising in 1944, it has been rebuilt at great sacrifice by its exhausted people. The Old City is still full of the fresh smell of cement; in the downtown district the ruins tower up like so many memorials to past horrors. Yet the city of Warsaw, whose people never quite know how they will live from one day to the next, is filled with an exuberance that almost instantly communicates itself to the observer. Whatever little else the residents of Warsaw gained by their October revolt, they won their freedom to laugh and cry, to hate and love.

Compared with resurrected Warsaw, Prague seems like a city only too glad to be safely dead. It is a different death from the one I sensed when I was here last, in August 1948, for the funeral of President Benes. Then the memory of the recent Communist coup of February weighed heavily on a tense city, the atmosphere was anxious and uncertain. You won't feel any tension in Prague today. Communist power has been legalized and dressed up in the regular forms of government, to the point where it is hardly visible any longer. De-Stalinization even caused the reins to be loosened a bit and people no longer shun the company of foreigners; indeed, they eagerly seek them out. After making sure that their German-speaking visitor was not from East Germany, the Czechs I met thawed out, grumbled a bit, *sotto voce* of course, and instantly changed the subject when a third person came along. All the people I talked to were faithful fans of Radio Vienna, Radio Munich, Beromuenster (near Basel in Switzerland), and so on. Jamming has practically been discontinued

and public opinion is surprisingly well informed. Except for Communist fanatics who invent their own "truth," nobody believes the official legend about a "fascist counter-revolution" in Hungary. Of course, the Communist bosses of Prague are not nearly so liberal as their Polish colleagues, who now let everybody who wants to read Western newspapers in the public reading rooms. In Czechoslovakia, you find Western newspapers and magazines only in newspaper offices and the reading rooms of hotels catering to foreign visitors. The newsstands display only the foreign Communist press—the Paris *Humanité*, the Rome *Unità*, the London *Daily Worker*. But even in inflexible Czechoslovakia thought control has become a fiction. Thoughts are free; so is speech, so long as it does not rise above a whisper.

SOOTHING as the relatively minor political concessions in Czechoslovakia are, it is the Czechoslovakians' favorable economic situation that really keeps them quiet, for they are incomparably better off than their Polish or Hungarian brethren. Small wonder, for Poland and Hungary have always been agrarian states that had to squeeze the means for their rapid industrialization out of an impoverished peasantry. Czechoslovakia, on the other hand, possessed a highly developed consumer goods industry before the war, and when the Communists took power the country could concentrate on expanding the heavy industries it already possessed. The job proved comparatively easy, and as early as the end of the first Five Year Plan Czechoslovak consumers were able to buy commodities freely which in other Communist countries are being grudgingly offered to the general population only now. In 1948 industrial production reached the level of 1937, and last year it was up another 50 per cent.

In Prague the department stores are full of all kinds of consumers' goods. Like her sisters in the West, the Czechoslovakian *Hausfrau* can buy an automatic washer for

herself or a television set, and her husband can buy a motorcycle. It is true that the goods are not up to Western standards—nylon stockings, for example, are of inferior quality; and what is worse, everything costs so much more. For a man who earns an average wage of 1,200 kronen a month and has to pay out more than 300 kronen for a decent pair of shoes and as high as 1,500 kronen for a decent suit, items like a bicycle (700 kronen), a washing machine (1,000-1,700 kronen), and a motorcycle (7,000 kronen) are luxuries that call for real sacrifices. Only rent is low in Czechoslovakia, amounting to about one-twentieth of average earnings. But then there are 50,000 applications for housing accommodation that can't be met. Maximum living space had to be limited, by decree, to twelve cubic meters (roughly a little over 27 cubic feet) per person. Since most people are employed by the state, they are able to eat the inexpensive meals (costing three kronen) provided at their place of work. Also, under a recent law, any employee who falls sick receives the same pay as during the last month of his employment. Stakhanovites continue to draw premium pay even when bedridden. Workers need not worry about vacation money, or about school tuition for their children—all such expenses are taken care of by the state.

Even so, a Czechoslovakian can hardly make ends meet unless his wife goes out to work (as most of them do), leaving her children to the care of a grandmother or a day nursery. But while the general standard of living is lower than it was under the First Republic, there are Czechs who make much of the fact that they don't have to worry about unemployment—the standard boast of Nazi and Communist totalitarians. True, the chronic shortage of labor has resulted in the indefinite postponement of much needed public projects, such as schools. But to these Czechs the labor shortage seems a feather in the regime's cap and not something it need feel apologetic about. Their paramount concern is with "security"; it does not occur to them, they

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do not really wish to hear, that workers in the "capitalist countries" are steadily employed, too, and just as secure as they, while possessing a great many other advantages.

The situation of the Czechoslovakian farmers also is far better than that of the farmers in Poland or Hungary. In a country already highly industrialized, there was no need for the Communist regime to squeeze the farm population to get the funds to initiate industrial projects. The local political bosses made one attempt to lower farm prices by fiat and then gave up. Independent farmers as well as the agricultural cooperatives are now given a price incentive to increase the production of "non-essential" commodities. On the whole, it is safe to say the farmers are little inclined to revolt.

Czechoslovakian agriculture does, however, have its problems. Right now, the once predominantly agricultural province of Slovakia is being industrialized (at the expense of the old established industries of Bohemia and Moravia) and the peasants are leaving the land *en masse*, so that there is an actual shortage of farm labor, with not enough farm machinery being manufactured or imported to compensate for the loss. This shortage is so pronounced, in fact, that government economists don't bother to deny that the development of agricultural cooperatives has slowed considerably. Czechoslovakia, which once exported food, must now import it.

IN THE whole of moderate and even-tempered Czechoslovakia, there is scarcely a person to compare with my Hungarian friend who, during the bloody October and November uprisings, swore he would die rather than live another day under a Stalinist regime.* People here carefully reason that they stand to lose too much. Throughout their history the Czechs have had a reputation for reasonableness and prudence (which if one wants to be nasty one can

call the impotent virtues). It was not for nothing that the Good Soldier Schweik became a national symbol—simple Schweik who outsmarted his successive Austrian superiors with the weapons of his irony and his opportunism, but who was never without a superior. It is just this Czechoslovak "reasonableness" which has made it possible for the Communists to wear a somewhat milder guise than is the case in more hot-headed countries. The middle class meekly allowed itself to be dispossessed and reduced to a subordinate status; never was their resentment bitter enough to require any preventive "liquidation." Czechoslovak Communists, in turn, move more softly and modestly than their Hungarian and Polish counterparts and have been rather more careful about arrogating to themselves the prerogatives of a new aristocracy. When Defense Minister Cepicka was demoted to a job in the Patent Office, it was only partly as a de-Stalinization measure; part of the reason, too, was Cepicka's growing reputation as a man out to get as many privileges as he could for the armed forces.

A third factor that mitigates the explosiveness of the Czechoslovak situation is the country's unique relation with Russia. After all, the Russians *did* free Prague from the Nazi grip (though not until four days after the Germans had evacuated the town). In the free elections of 1946, the old Czech Communist party won 41 per cent of the Moravian and Bohemian vote, and 30 per cent of the Slovak vote. And though the 1948 putsch took place against a menacing background of Russian bayonets, the presence of Soviet troops has never bred that all-but-universal hatred which has united the people in Poland and in Hungary.

Just the same, Prague's constant fawning on Moscow is more than most Czechs can stomach. On May Day and on Liberation Day (May 9), Prague, along with the rest of the country, was smothered in flags. Everywhere the Soviet flag flew side by side with the Czech. "Just like in the time of

*See "Budapest Under Fire," by Peter Schmid, in the January COMMENTARY.—ED.

the Protectorate," remarked a Czech friend, "only then we flew the Swastika." Even a party-line Communist remarked: "The way our government behaves, no wonder everybody dislikes the Russians. I'm sick and tired of all this adulation of our 'liberators.'" Yet all this is not enough to make the Czechs change old habits and hate the Russians; on the contrary, they continue to regard them—together with the French—as their natural allies.

But the Czechs have good reason to hate the Russians, if they would allow themselves to. If their standard of living is low compared to that of Western peoples, the Russians are as much to blame as Czechoslovakia's own inefficient bureaucracy. After "integrating" Czechoslovakia into the Eastern bloc, the Russians made sure that the Czechs sold to the other satellites rather than in the free world markets, where their goods would have fetched much higher prices; thus Czechoslovakia's economic interests have been subordinated to the political claims of "socialist solidarity." Czech economists freely admit that for a long time the Russians paid far too little for Czech uranium, though they claim that now the matter has been straightened out. In general, however, Czechoslovakia—thanks to her highly developed industries—occupies a stronger trading position vis-à-vis Russia than either Hungary or Poland, and is much less open to Russian exploitation.

But the fact remains that the whole structure of Czech commerce has been so transformed since the Communist seizure of power that purely economic considerations would be likely to involve Czechoslovakia with the Soviet bloc even if she could manage to get out of it politically. In 1939 only 1.5 per cent of Czech trade was with the Soviet Union, 10 per cent with the neighboring Danube countries, and 88 per cent with the rest of the world. At present, 75 per cent of her commerce is with countries of the Soviet bloc, which in the name of socialist brotherhood insist on long-term credits or, only too often, on bartering luxury goods for machinery. To understand

just how uneconomic these exchanges are, one need only peek into a worker's home in Ostrava Pilsen and see the lady of the house going about her chores in a housecoat made of Chinese brocade. Czechoslovakia has also had to pay the bill for a good part of Russia's and the Soviet bloc's economic aid program in the Middle and Far East. And Czechoslovakia's economic vassalage seems to be getting worse rather than better. Last spring, after President Zapotocky's trip to Moscow, a still closer "coordination" of Russian and Czech industry was agreed upon. What will be the consequences for Czechoslovakia of Khrushchev's recent visit, following his purge of Malenkov et al., remains to be seen.

THE quiet of Prague is not the quiet of the graveyard. It is rather the stillness of a schoolroom, with the pupils dozing, while up front the teacher lectures. Even loyal Communists admit quite freely that the party bosses are mediocre hacks. President Zapotocky, though he has almost managed to become a national father image and daily receives thousands of letters addressed to "Comrade President," completely lacks the wisdom (not to speak of other qualities) which distinguishes a Gomulka. A Communist bureaucracy stands or falls with the men at the top, and in Prague these are for the most part party windbags parroting the same old ideas, or simply organization hacks. In the lower ranks their type is slowly being replaced by the "specialists" of the various industrial directorates, but the mediocrities are still in the top government jobs. It is their presence that makes the air of Prague so suffocating. Prague, once so gay, is a gloomy city now, even though it is well-to-do by Soviet standards; it is gray with that terrible grayness of the Soviet world. True, people are a bit freer than before, but they are not free. They can venture a criticism of specific institutions, but not of the system itself. "In a way, a highly restricted freedom is worse than none at all," a professor complained to me, "because it stimulates one's appetite

without ever satisfying it." When I asked him whether this appetite will in time grow big enough to endanger those who frustrate it, he shook his head: "Only those who are old enough to remember the days of the First Republic feel the loss of intellectual freedom. The young people who grew up, first under the Nazis and now under the Communists, don't care. They are nihilists or at best pragmatists who think it useless to waste time on things they have no say about." If he is right, it means there is no life left in the Czech universities—or, for that matter, any place else in the country. Polish newspaper men, coming out of one of the best cabarets in Prague, complained, "Not one political joke, nothing but stories about how wonderful Prague is, how everybody is ready to sacrifice himself for her. Baloney! Those guys aren't the sacrificing type."

I asked a young woman, the editor of a

literary magazine, what effect the Hungarian revolt had had on the Czech intelligentsia, and received this disarmingly frank answer: "Our only concern was to keep very, very still, so that nothing like it might happen to us." When I remarked that such an attitude did not seem to me especially heroic, she defended herself energetically: "Don't you think that in the long run it is wiser to allow things to evolve slowly, to acknowledge and correct past errors, to replace incompetents gradually, instead of sweeping them out *en masse*? Don't forget that one of the reasons for what happened in Poland and in Hungary was those countries' lack of real democratic tradition. Among us Czechs, democratic traditions are so strong that we even use democratic means to mitigate the harshness of Communism. I assure you that we shall travel just as far, and arrive no later."

Perhaps.